

San Bernardino County Sun

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Crossing funds gap widens

Assembly panel looks at region's rail traffic woes

By Andrew Silva

Saturday, August 13, 2005 - There's not enough money to build needed bridges and underpasses at railroad crossings to keep motorists moving as the explosion in rail traffic continues, an Assembly committee was told Friday at a hearing at the historic Santa Fe Depot in San Bernardino.

The money provided by the huge federal transportation bill signed by President Bush this week provides enough for only one of the 30 rail bridges needed in San Bernardino County, said Ty Schuiling, director of planning for San Bernardino Associated Governments, the county transportation agency otherwise known as Sanbag.

The Assembly Select Committee on the Alameda Corridor East project came to San Bernardino to get an update on the the proposed network of bridges and underpasses needed to separate trucks and cars from the increasing number and length of trains.

Alameda Corridor East is the umbrella name for the network of railroad bridges and underpasses needed in San Bernardino, Riverside, Los Angeles and Orange counties. The cost to build about 130 such projects is estimated at \$3 billion.

Just in San Bernardino County, the cost could be \$750 million for the projects.

The federal bill provided \$155 million for Alameda Corridor East projects to the four-county region. Officials in San Bernardino County guess it may get about \$30 million.

Local officials hope to begin construction in the next year or two on five crossings:

- Ramona Avenue in Montclair.
- Monte Vista Avenue in Montclair.
- Milliken Avenue in Ontario.
- Hunts Lane on the Colton-San Bernardino border.
- State Street in north San Bernardino.

The overarching question is who will pay for the rest.

Officials argue that more than 40percent of the nation's container traffic runs through Southern California on its way to markets in the rest of the nation while the state and local governments are left to pick up the cost in terms of construction, air pollution and traffic gridlocked at rail crossings.

"We are suffering the after-effects' of traffic and pollution, said Assemblywoman Gloria Negrete McLeod, D-Chino, and chairwoman of the committee. "By and large, we are not getting the benefit.'

She said there hasn't been enough communication between state and federal elected officials to emphasize what an important national issue this is.

While some critics question the lack of generosity from the federal government, even the state can pose a problem.

But money from the state gas tax, required to be used only for transportation projects after the passage of Proposition 42, will be fully funded for the first time in a couple of years to the tune of \$1.3 billion.

Getting the gas-tax money pointed back to transportation, instead of to help bail out the rest of the state budget, took a major coordinated lobbying effort that should be continued, said Michael Lawson, executive director of Transportation California, an advocacy group that originally pushed Proposition 42.

One legislator has proposed a bill that would impose a fee on containers to generate money for projects to reduce the effects of increasing train and truck traffic through the region.

Railroads pay 5percent or 10percent of the cost for bridges and underpasses, called grade separations, and BNSF is opposed to the container fee legislation, said LaDonna DiCamillo, director of government affairs for BNSF.

Any increase in the cost of shipping by rail could drive shippers to trucks, further clogging freeways and increasing air pollution, she said.

Railroads get no benefit in efficiency or speed from bridges and underpasses, making them reluctant to increase their contributions to those kinds of projects.

In some cases, the private sector can join with government agencies to pay for needed rail and road improvements, if there's a way for the private entity to earn a profit, said **Heather Copp, chief financial officer for the Southern California Association of Governments, the broad regional planning agency.**